

VZCZCXRO9043
OO RUEHBI RUEHCI
DE RUEHCI #0092/01 0781332
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 191332Z MAR 07
FM AMCONSUL KOLKATA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1461
INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI IMMEDIATE 1372
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 0600
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 0594
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 0376
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0379
RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON 0242
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 0303
RHMFIUU/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEIDN/DNI WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 1804

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 KOLKATA 000092

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [SOCI](#) [ASEC](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: WEST BENGAL FACES FALLOUT FROM NANDIGRAM VIOLENCE

REF: A) KOLKATA 088 B) CALCUTTA 0011 C) CALCUTTA 0017 D) 06 CALCUTTA 0578

11. (SBU) Summary: The rural West Bengal district of Nandigram remains tense but quiet following the March 14 violence between police, Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) activists and local villagers, which resulted in at least 14 deaths and 71 injuries (REF. A). Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee and CPM officials have not apologized for the deaths but have conceded that the police were too aggressive in quelling the protests against land acquisition for a Special Economic Zone (SEZ). The GOWB leadership now says that land in Nandigram will not be acquired for an SEZ. A team from the national Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has started its inquiry into the incident and initial reports reveal the participation of CPM members in the killings. CM Bhattacharjee has faced criticism from many sources, with outsiders such as Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader L. K. Advani and social activist Medha Patkar traveling to the area to express solidarity with the villagers. However, Bhattacharjee told visiting National Intelligence Council (NIC) Vice Chairman Dr. David Gordon and National Intelligence Officer for South Asia (NIO-SA) Ambassador Nancy Powell that the greatest challenge he faces is from the Left Front coalition members, the Forward Bloc, the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and the Communist Party of India (CPI), who have demanded a larger role in policy planning. On March 18, the CM and his party accepted the coalition members' demands and promised to accept their input on future policies. The Nandigram violence has created a crisis of confidence in CM Bhattacharjee and his efforts for rapid industrialization in West Bengal and has brought into full relief the complex layers of political intrigue in the state as each group or interest seeks to extract its advantage: the marginalized opposition hopes to use the issue to achieve relevance, Muslim groups see a catalyst to create a new "Muslim League," and even Left Front members now demand their pound of flesh from the CPM. End Summary.

12. (U) West Bengal continues to face the political fallout from the deaths of 14 people on March 14 in the rural district of Nandigram, located approximately 150 km southwest of Kolkata. The deaths resulted from violent clashes between the police (supported by CPM activists) and local villagers opposed to their land being acquired for an SEZ. On March 16, West Bengal and Kolkata came to a standstill when opposition parties, Trinamul Congress, Congress Party, BJP, Socialist Unity Center for India (SUCI) and Maoist faction CPI-(Marxist-Leninist), called for a general strike or "bandh" to protest the killings.

Strike enforcers torched a bus in Kolkata and police stations in other parts of the state but no serious injuries were reported.

13. (SBU) CM Bhattacharjee admitted that the authorities did not anticipate the level of violence that would result from the police's efforts to enter Nandigram, but he did not apologize for deaths, expressing only regret for the incident. WB Home Secretary Prasad Ranjan Ray, speaking to NIO-SA Ambassador

SIPDIS

Powell and NIC Vice Chairman Dr. Gordon on the day of the general strike, conceded that the police had over-reacted and attributed it to poor training. He said that protestors confronted the police with women and children in the front ranks. The men in the back ranks used homemade bombs and simple, single-shot country guns and initially the police responded with tear gas and batons but as the violence escalated, the police began shooting. The authorities have backed down from further confrontation and have pulled the police back from the contentious areas. In addition, the CM promised that Nandigram would not be part of any future SEZ plans.

14. (SBU) A CBI team arrived on Friday, March 16 and its initial investigations indicate that the death toll may be higher than 14 people and point to the participation of CPM activists in the killings. While investigating in one village near the clash, CBI officials arrested ten suspected CPM members with weapons, ammunitions and police helmets. According to reports, there was also a blood trail, indicating the possibility that additional unidentified bodies were removed from the area and hidden or disposed. BBC reporter Subir Bhaumick (protect) told Ambassador Powell and Dr. Gordon during their March 15-18 visit to Kolkata that the CPM cadres were armed and participated in the attacks on the protesting villagers and likely contributed to the escalation of the violence. Footage of victims of the attack,

KOLKATA 00000092 002 OF 003

labeled, "Nandigram Mass Killing" is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-G5NCSqvSM>.

15. (U) The violence in West Bengal attracted the attention of many outsiders, including BJP leaders L.K. Advani, Sushma Swaraj, Janata Dal (United) leader George Fernandes and a 10-member national opposition coalition National Democratic Alliance (NDA) team. Advani and the NDA leaders traveled to WB on March 17 to condemn the CPM, a political rival at the national level, on their home turf. Advani demanded that the GOI impose central rule on the state. However, dropping into a state with a limited BJP presence and giving remarks in Hindi to a mostly Bengali-speaking rural community, the NDA leaders' presence did not generate a significant response from the villagers. Social activist Medha Patkar also returned to the state after early forays in December and February following violence in Singur, where clashes occurred over plans for a new Tata car factory in that rural area just west of Kolkata (REF. D). Patkar's on-again, off-again presence in the state has also not resulted in a significant impact.

16. (U) Local opposition groups such as the Trinamul Congress, Congress and fringe Maoist factions have been attempting to capitalize on the land issue as well. However, Trinamul leader Mamata Banerjee is widely seen as erratic and unable to mount a coherent opposition to the CPM-led GOWB. The other parties are too small and their organization too limited to effectively confront the GOWB.

17. (SBU) Muslim organization Jamiat-e-Ulema Hind (JUH), led by General Secretary Siddiquillah Chowdhury, has also jumped into the fray, claiming that the development plan for Nandigram is an effort to disenfranchise the sizeable Muslim minority. Chowdhury had earlier told ConGen that following the round of violence in Nandigram in January, JUH was intent on forming a new Muslim political party (REFS B & C). BBC reporter Bhaumick told Ambassador Powell and Dr. Gordon that the JUH is hoping to

form a new "Muslim League" along with the newly formed Muslim Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF) and will try to pull votes from the mainstream secular parties. Lending credence to Bhaumick's comments, a March 18 report in the "Panchjanya Weekly" noted that in the northeastern state of Tripura, also run by the CPM, state JUH leader Assad Madin held a public meeting to demand a new Muslim political party. In attendance at the Tripura meeting was AUDF leader Badruddin Amjal and party president Hafeez Rashee Ahmed Choudhury. (Note: AUDF was formed in December 2005 prior to the Assam state assembly elections because state Muslim Congress leaders felt the Congress Party was ignoring Muslim concerns in Assam.) On March 19, approximately 10,000 JUH supporters attempted to charge the West Bengal state secretariat, the "Writers Building," but were beaten back by the police.

18. (SBU) However, CM Bhattacharjee seemed less worried about external threats and more focused on internal conflict with his Left Front allies: the Forward Bloc, RSP and CPI. On March 16, when asked by NIO-SA Ambassador Powell what was his greatest concern for the state's future development, Bhattacharjee responded that it was in dealing with the other Left Front parties. The CM noted that even though the CPM maintains a dominant majority in the state assembly in its own right, the many decades of collective struggle meant that the other Left parties cannot be easily dismissed and that his policies would have to be accepted by the other parties. BBC Reporter Bhaumick told ConGen later that evening that the Left Front gave an ultimatum to the CM and the CPM that unless the Left parties had more input on policies, they would withdraw their ministers from the government. The following day, the press reported that the CPM and Bhattacharjee had conceded to most of the Left parties' demands: 1) Fix responsibility - Bhattacharjee conceded some responsibility for the tragedy but would wait for the CBI report; 2) Withdraw police from Nandigram - police are being pulled out in phases; 3) The Left Front should condemn the carnage - CPM will express regret but offer no condemnation; 4) No land will be acquired in Nandigram for an SEZ - the CPM will not acquire land in the area; 5) Finally and critically, only the cabinet core committee or front committee should make major policy decisions - the CPM accepted only that it would consult the cabinet and front committees.

19. (SBU) Comment: The Nandigram conflagration has become a

KOLKATA 00000092 003 OF 003

veritable "Bonfire of the Vanities," with the many political players all maneuvering for advantage. Even outside national leaders like the BJP's L.K. Advani have come to pick-over the carnage. It is too early to tell if the JUH will be successful in using Nandigram as the catalyst to create a separate Muslim party and one in conjunction with the AUDF that could capture the Muslim voters in the eastern region. However, the greatest immediate fallout appears to be within the CPM's Left Front, with CM Bhattacharjee's effort at rapid industrial development now likely to suffer a serious setback and the Leftist ideologues gaining an upper hand in internal policy disputes. Bhattacharjee's position within the coalition and among sympathetic supporters, such as the academics, intellectuals and other Leftist sympathizers has been weakened, and many have called for him to step down. Bhattacharjee is unlikely to resign but he will certainly be constrained by the damage from the Nandigram violence and the state will continue to experience residual effects, with demonstrations and protests as opposition parties seek to further inflame resentment against the CPM government in order to expand their limited political influence.

JARDINE